



Jim Lacy had stolen the last of Ben's cattle! As Dillon told the story, Hettie wilted in agony. Nevada—stealing from Ben!

"Give me a couple days off, boss," asked Dillon. "I'll find out if it's true."

"No—some rustler would plug you."

"But I want to go." Dillon's face reddened. Hettie saw that this rustling deal rankled in him.

"Dillon, I'm sendin' you and Raidey with six of the boys to Silver Meadows to see if it's true. Hurry back!"



As Dillon rode away, Ina approached Ben and Hettie. "What has happened, Ben?" Ina asked.

"Dillon reports that Jim Lacy threatened to steal all the cattle at Silver Meadows. If he does, that'll clean me out."



"Dear," declared Ina, "I haven't confidence in this Dillon."

"Nor have I," retorted Hettie. "He is not on the level, Ben."

Ben flared up anew. "No, nor do you have any confidence in me," he spoke bitterly.



About noon of the third day, Raidy and the men returned from their trip to Silver Meadows to verify the story that Lacy had stolen the last of Ben's cattle. "Howdy, boss," called Raidy. "Took you long enough," answered Ben. "Where's Dillon?"



"Dillon leaves the bad reports for me to make, boss," drawled Raidy. "Boss, you're rustled off the range!" Ben made a flashing, violent gesture, as if to strike. He paled, his eyes shot fire.



"They've cleaned me?" Ben's voice was harsh. "Yes, boss. I made sure. I wasn't trustin' Dillon to make a full report. Dillon was shore sore—but not because they were yore cattle, I'm thinkin' He's sore about somethin' else."



Hettie and Ina joined the excited group. As they approached, they heard Raidy's fatal words. Ben had been cleaned out.

"Give us the facts about it, Raidy," demanded Ben.



"Wal," replied Raidy. "Tom Day was at the Meadows when we arrived. Everything was gone. Seems that Jim Lacy sent Tom word by a sheep herder. Sent his respects and said he'd drop into Winthrop one of these days."



"I'll hang him," said Ben with deadly calm. "No, boss—Lacy ain't gonna be hung. He'll die in his boots. This feller Lacy is a cool one—and afeered of nothin'."



"Raidy, I'm through sitting around. I've sent for sheriffs and I'm having Dillon get twenty-five of the hardest men he can gather. I'll run down this thieving gang! I'm offering \$10,000 for Lacy—dead or alive!"

- JACK
ABBOTT -
C 91



Ten thousand dollars for Lacy—dead or alive! Hettie gasped. Her heart pounded! Then she heard Raidy's cold voice. "Wal, boss, you're talkin' high, wide an' handsome. But this range ain't big enough for me an' Dillon. I jest have to quit."



"Very well, Raidy. I'm sorry you see it that way!" returned Ben coldly. "Boss, I'm not likin' this Dillon fellow. He's been seen too much with Cedar Hatt, an' you know what Hatt is."



Hettie fled. As she ran, she heard Ina deliver a stinging rebuke to her husband. It was too terrible! For weeks Ben had not been himself. And now he was letting loyal old Raidy go. Ben seemed to have lost faith in everyone but Dillon.



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Hettie ran to her room. Her mind was in a turmoil. What would Ben do when he discovered that the thieving Jim Lacy was really his old pal, Nevada? She must get her horse and ride. Perhaps, out on the trail, she could find a solution for this terrible problem.



After leaving Marvie and Rose Hatt, Nevada ran his horse through the woods. Now the time had come to meet Dillon! His long campaign was approaching its climax with deadly swiftness.



Mile after mile he sped, determined to reach Ben Ide's ranch before Marvie arrived. If Marvie revealed Nevada's identity, his plans would be frustrated.



So swiftly he rode that he surprised some graceful deer, grazing near a trampled salt-lick. As he rode, his mind fixed on one thing. This was his hour!



The trail grew broad and sandy, so that his horse speeded almost noiselessly on. Nevada rode around an abrupt curve and jerked his mount to a standstill. A rider was coming toward him. He heard a cry! Hettie Ide!



It was a blow to Nevada, meeting Hettie Ide now—she would never approve the job he intended to do at the Ide ranch. Hettie paled as she recognized him. "You!" she gasped.



Nevada's iron composure covered the pounding of his heart. "Wal, shore it's Hettie Ide," he drawled in the cool, leisurely southern accent that cut out her heart like blades.



"I saw you—in Winthrop," began Hettie, as if to find relief from oppression. "After—you killed—that man. You walked right past me."



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"Shore, I reckoned you might." No emotion showed in his features that he was surprised. "Too bad you had to run into me heah!"
"Too bad! . . . It's terrible! But I'm glad," exclaimed Hettie.
"Thank you, an' I'm sorry I can't return the compliment."



Nevada's cool nonchalance inflamed Hettie. She did not know that passion stirred within him. His heart cried out, but his face was a mask of indifference. He must not weaken to this girl he loved, for his mind was set on destroying the enemies of Ben Ide.



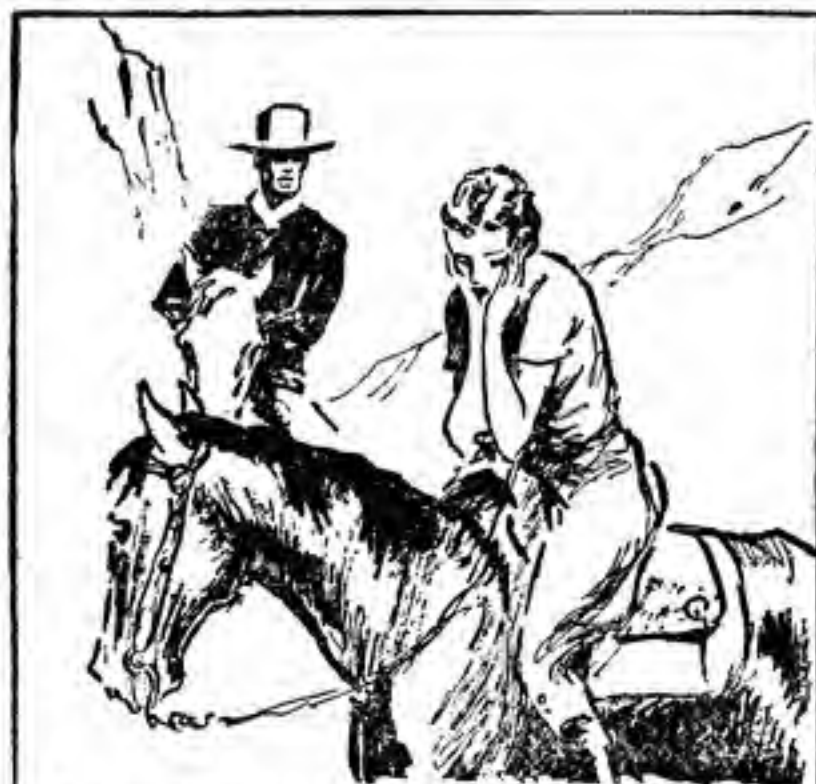
"Why didn't you trust me?" she asked.
 "Hettie, there was a time, long ago, when I'd rather have been daid than to let you know I was Jim Lacy."
 "You were ashamed?"



"I was—then," he answered.
 "Then you're not ashamed—now," she faltered.
 "Wal, it coain't matter now."
 "Ben doesn't dream his pal, Nevada, is the notorious Jim Lacy."
 "Too bad he's got to find out soon," declared Jim.



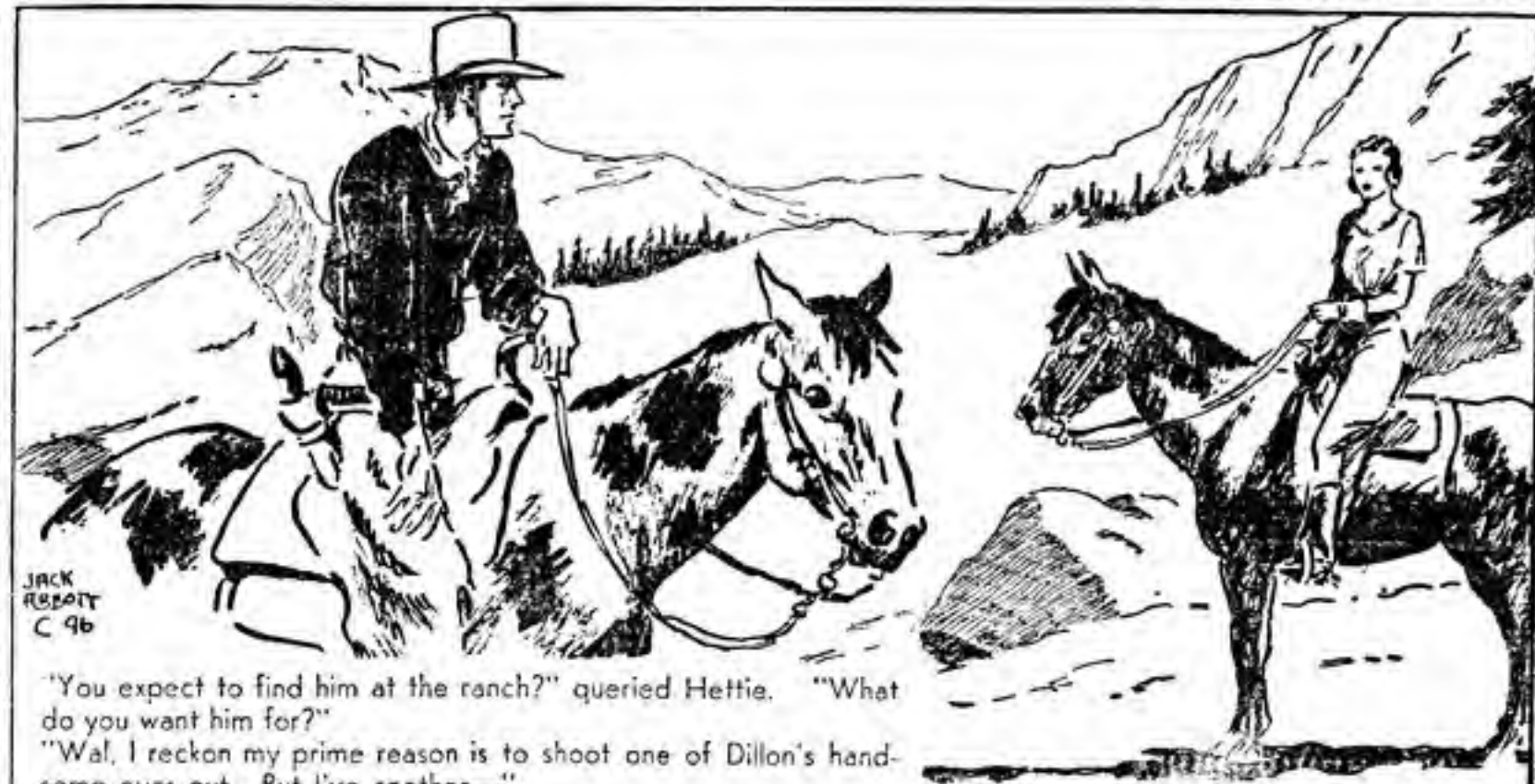
"How can you be so hatefully cool?" burst out Hettie. "Ben loved you. I— . . . Ben searched everywhere. Now —you turn up as Jim Lacy! You stole cattle from the man who worships you! Did you know they were Ben's cattle?"
 "Shore—I did." His face turned pale.



"It will—almost kill Ben—to hear that you stole from him." Nevada's silence roused Hettie to a sudden, furious passion. She did not read in that bronzed face the agony of his soul. She knew not that his indifference was a sacrifice for love of herself and Ben Ide.



In that same, indifferent voice he told Hettie of seeing her resist Dillon's advances—told how he had afterward dared Dillon to draw—and was now hunting him down.



"You expect to find him at the ranch?" queried Hettie. "What do you want him for?"
 "Wal, I reckon my prime reason is to shoot one of Dillon's handsome eyes out. But I've another—"
 "Oh! You've something against Dillon?"
 "I should smile I have! If I hadn't met you, he'd be daid now—an' probably me, too," answered Nevada.

JACK
ROBERT
C 96



As Hettie blocked his path to the ranch, Nevada spoke. "Hettie, Dillon's a bad hombre . . . I'll kill him shore, but he might return the compliment."
 "Don't! Don't do this, Nevada. Give up this life—take me away with you. I have money. We can start anew!"



"Are you crazy, Hettie?"
 "Not yet—but I soon will be. Nevada, I—still—love you. I don't care what you've been. Take me away! Nevada, don't you love me?"
 "Love you?" Nevada laughed bitterly.



—JACK
 ABBOTT—
 C 97

"Yes, I love you—mad woman—but I cain't ruin you!" he said hoarsely.
 "Then you don't love me!"

Violently he grasped her—her senses reeled. For a brief, wild moment he kissed her—then let her slide to the ground.



Nevada felt for a moment that he could not go on. To take this girl meant his happiness—to refuse meant another gun fight—perhaps death, and sure disgrace. But a vision of Ben Ide flooded his mind.



"You've ruined all my faith in you—in men. I thought you would at least be true to Ben. You are a liar—a failure—a weakling," she sobbed. "You—stole from my brother."
"Reckon that'll be about all I want to heah," he said, his voice breaking. "Listen! . . . I heah hosses comin'."



"It's Marvie with his gal—Rose Hatt," Nevada declared.
"Oh—I'm glad!"
"Wal, Miss Hettie, you might heah somethin' from Marvie an' Rose. Anyway, don't rustle home too quick."



"I'm leavin' right now," he went on, with a strange gleam in his eyes. How desperately he hated leaving her. "It's about sunset. Sunset for Dillon! An' shore sunset for me!"